

Mukhtar Mai, an Emblem of Struggle against Oppression

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This paper seeks to analyse Mukhtar Mai's memoir *In The Name of Honor* (2006) from the point of view of a victimized female sufferer who subsequently resists patriarchal society and becomes an emblem of struggle against oppression. Before taking up Mukhtar Mai's memoir, I would like to focus on the difference between memoir and autobiography. The line between memoir and autobiography is vague. Like an autobiography, a memoir is a narrative that reveals experiences within the author's lifetime. But there are obvious and practical differences between the two genres. In essence, an autobiography is a chronological telling of one's experiences, which includes phases such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, etc., while a memoir provides a much more specific timeline and a much more intimate relationship to the writer's own memories, feelings and emotions. "Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, memoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer's life that was unusually vivid, such as childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public service or some other special circumstance" (Zinsser 15). Obviously, autobiographies and memoirs are nonfictional texts written by the author about specific events in his or her life. According to Andre Maurois:

Autobiography is a prolonged speech for the defense and is of two types; one is where the writing is as interesting as novels and as true as the finest life. It has truth tone and a fidelity and impartiality in portraiture of a very high quality indeed. Best autobiographies are those, which expose the inner journey of the self and depict the inner struggles of the person. It establishes a coherent and individual identity of the person. (84)

An autobiography depicts the hidden form of inwardness and the writer has to establish the self-portrait in the public eye. Philips Lejeune has offered a very cogent definition of autobiography which emphasises the significance of the author's signature and his/her intentions. According to Lejeune, "author constructs the discursive elements of autobiographical pact with the

reader"(12). In the case of women's autobiography, feminist theorists have emphasised the fact that women's relationship to authorship is historically different from that of men's. The critical theories formulated by male critics are not applicable to women's life writing owing to different biological, socio-political as well as psycho-cultural reasons. In men's autobiography-writing 'I' is at the centre of every incident, well defined, isolated and opposed to the world. But women's autobiography-writing projects a dotted 'i' which is on the periphery, collective, relational and representative of a class. Shari Benstock in her *Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* notes:

The self that would reside at the centre of the text is decentred and often is absent altogether in women's autobiographical texts. The very requirements of genre are put into question by the limits of gender which is to say because these two terms are etymologically linked, genre; itself raises questions about gender. (20)

Hence in autobiographical writing gender significantly affects the representation of author's world and experiences. Furthermore, Gusdorf, who is identified as dean of autobiographical writing, particularly for the theoretical foundation of genre, has recognized that "self, self-creation, and self consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities and non western peoples" (29). Following his model of individualistic and unique selfhood, theorists of autobiography from Ronald Barthes to James Olney have persisted in maintaining the idea of centrally located isolated "I" as precondition for autobiography. "Separate selfhood is the very motive of autobiographical creation," (22) asserted Olney. Lately, since 70's feminist theorists like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Nancy Chodorow, Shiela Rowbotham, Nancy Friedman and others have questioned this traditional model of isolated self, on the ground that it does not take into consideration minority classes. As to quote Friedman:

The model of separate and unique selfhood that is highlighted in his

[Gusdorfs] work and shared by other critics established a critical bias that leads to the misreading and marginalization of autobiographical texts by women and minorities in the process of canon formation. (34)

According to these critics, centrally located isolated self supports restrictive and unspoken canon of autobiographical writing in literary tradition. One has to consider whether a woman reveals her unique self-indulges in self-exploration. A woman's autobiography generally deals with the various relationships like those with her parents, siblings and with her spouse, children and other members of her family. Her identity is established only because of her these relationships. A man's autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, achievements and the world of work. He rarely focuses on his family relationships. Men's autobiographical writing, notes Jelinek in her *Women's Autobiographical: Essays in Criticism*, "focuses on their successful professional life and its relationship to their times"(78). However exceptions can be found in the autobiographies of a man like Bertrad Rusell. On the contrary, a woman forms her identity in relation to others. Nancy Chodorow in her book, *Psychoanalysis and Sociology of Gender Socialization* suggests that the concept of "separate selfhood is inapplicable to women as they have relational identity" (41). It encompasses that basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world. Mary Mason, in her essay *The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers* argues that "women's sense of self exists within a context of the deep awareness of others" (213). Therefore, a woman is constantly aware of the society's prescription for her female self. The research in women's identity formation in the Indian context by the psycho analysts like Sudhir Kakar, Indira Parikh and Aashish Nandy supports the theory of women's collective selfhood. According to these psychoanalysts, instead of hampering their growth such a collective trait strengthens their personality.

In case of a country like Pakistan where patriarchy is in full swing till now, autobiographical representation by a woman is a revolutionary task. Patterns of discrimination might have changed but they are very much there, fabricated under the guise of honour and protected by *Qisas* and *Diyat*. *Qisas* means retaliation or retributive justice, a sort of revenge or nemesis where Sharia allows equal retaliation as punishment. *Diyat* in Islamic Sharia Law is the financial compensation paid to the victim or heirs of victim in cases of murder, bodily harm or property damage. As stated in *International Federation for Human Rights Report*:

Under Islamic law, the punishment can either be in the form of qisas (equal or similar punishment for the crime committed) or diyat (compensation payable to the victim's legal heirs). The qisas and diyat Ordinance states that the death penalty may be given as qisas for intentionally causing death, or for causing the death of someone other than the person intended. The heirs may waive this right, however, in which case the death penalty cannot be enforced; the convict becomes liable to pay diyat, compensation to the heirs of the victim, and may also be sentenced to imprisonment under art. 311 PPC (although courts have only exceptionally maintained a sentence after waiver by the heirs or the victim). (38)

The formal legal system that operates under the statutory law is mostly implemented in urban and semi urban areas, while more popularly in rural and tribal areas local customary courts (Jirgas and Panchyats) pass verdicts which are respected and implemented by the community. The hierarchy of caste system is carefully maintained. A caste system, then, can be said to occur when a society is composed of birth-ascribed, hierarchically ordered, and culturally distinct groups (castes). Underlying hierarchical interaction between castes is the existence of what has been termed "status summation" (Barth 144). In lower castes and tribal areas, violence against women and gang rapes are common occurrences where woman is treated as a man's property and honour.

Violence targeting women in Pakistan manifests in a variety of ways and is usually carried out in combination with other human and women's rights violations in the form of physical and psychological abuse. Radhika Coomaraswamy has commented in preface to *Violence Against Women and Crimes of Honour* that "Crime committed for honour is allegedly justified in social setting where the idea of masculinity is underpinned by a notion of honour of an individual man or family or community and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality" (xi). The element of patriarchy has caused a total disregard for women in the Pakistani society. As stated by Ibrahim

The trend of male dominance becomes a factor causing violence to the other gender. Women are viewed inferior to be "reined in" by men for

the better or, in the majority of cases, for the worse. They cannot raise their voice against violence by men, i.e. fathers, brothers and, after marriage, husbands and their male relatives, who are in control of their physical being. (2)

Women in Pakistan are extremely vulnerable to discrimination and social exclusion and due to this vulnerability, scheduled caste women experience double discrimination as they are discriminated both on the basis of caste and gender. As stated by Universal Periodic Review: Pakistan "Scheduled caste women are subject to rape assaults and culprits easily get away due to weak socio-economic status of victims" (May 2008). In such backdrop, "the female plight and predicament have different interpretations for women from different strata. However, they do suffer in different ways. Institutional and individual violence are not unknown phenomena for practically all Pakistani women (UN, 2011).

Mukhtar Mai, a survivor of gang rape is one such victim from the rural Tehsil of Jatoli of Muzaffargarh District of Pakistan, where caste system is a means of systematic discrimination. And as Sehar Mughal, a Pakistani feminist scholar points out:

Even today the image of Mukhtar Mai represents Pakistani women largely as victim of patriarchy – her courage and resolve portrayed is rarely found among other Pakistani women. However, within the larger picture, for decades the Pakistani women's movement has actively championed women's rights, challenging misogynistic Islamic laws (4).

In 2006, Mukhtar Mai published a memoir with the help of Marie Therese, *In The Name of Honor* relating her saga of gruesome gang rape that shook the whole world and gained media attention all over the world. Nicholas Kristof, renowned columnist of *The New York Times* wrote foreword to her memoir, avowing her struggle and endurance. Mai became the first woman in Pakistan to put tribal justice on trial. She was born into a Gujjar caste and spoke only Saraiki, a minority dialect of Punjabi. "My childhood was a simple one of poverty, neither wonderful nor miserable, but full of joy," (Mai 22). She writes in her book, *In the Name of Honor*, "from an early age girls are taught that men are to be "obeyed" and "feared" (23). She was leading a routine life, teaching village children the Quran, when her world was turned upside down due to tribal conflict of Gujjars with Mastois. The powerful Mastoi had accused her 12-year old brother Shakur of speaking to one of their women,

Salma, who was over 20. In retribution for Shakoor's actions, a tribal council, or jirga, was called to bring justice for the Mastoi family. "The use of women in this way is part of the patriarchal traditions of the area which see women as men's property; therefore, any harm against the women is viewed as harm against the family" (Critelli 236).

On the night of June 22, 2002, Mai's family reached a decision that Mai would confront the influential and aggressive Mastoi clan on behalf of her family. Mai claimed "she knew her brother did nothing wrong, but she had to bow to the Mastoi's demands" (Mai 1). "Mai was told that Maulvi Abdul Razzaq, a trusted Imam, had tried to mediate the problem, but the Mastoi men would not agree to any reconciliation attempts, Razzaq suggested an appeasement solution, suggesting that a woman from Shakoor's family be the one to apologize publically for his behavior" (Buse 6 February 2006). Her family told her that their last chance was for her to ask for forgiveness before the village jirga, or jury. "Jirgas are village councils that usually exist in lawless parts of the world – where official sanctions and laws are not adhered to" (Mai 25) and when they wish to convey a message to other men, they use bodies of women as the medium through which they throw a challenge to other men. One of the many ways in which men seek to inflict defeat upon their opponents in war is to scar and assault their women. Mai was the natural choice to be the emissary for this apology because she was a divorced woman and divorced women are looked down upon in patriarchal structure.

Mai agreed to confront the Mastois and walked to their farm house, 300 yards away, with her father, her uncle, Haji Altaf, and family friend, Ghulam Nabi. Mai recalled walking with her Quran clasped close to her chest, because she considered it her "respectability and her strength" (Mai 5). During hardships and calamities it is natural for a human being to surrender him/herself to the power of God. As Mai neared the Mastoi farm, she recalled seeing anywhere from 100 to 250 men – mostly Mastois. Mukhtar saw Faiz Mohammed, the Mastoi clan leader, as well as four men -Abdul Khaliq, Ghulam Farid, Allah Dita, and Mohammed Faiz -- all armed with rifles and a pistol. The guns were pointed at the Gujjar family as they arrived. Mai spread her shawl on the ground at their feet as a sign of allegiance but Mastois showed complete disregard for Mai's apology.

Mai's attempt at a peaceful resolution was greeted with silence, and then she began to recognize the gravity of the situation. The silence was broken when Abdul Khaliq, Ghulam Farid Mastoi, Allah Dita and Mohammed Faiz pushed and then dragged her into a room. She said later that she was dragged away "like a

goat led to slaughter”(Mai 9) as she screamed, “In the name of the Quran, release me! In the name of God, let me go!”(Mai 9). Additional malice was shown to her when she was being shoved half-naked out of the home and onto the ground in front of the crowd. Her father, the secondary victim, ran to her side and covered her with his shawl to protect whatever was left as he has also experienced the trauma “as significant other”(Figley and Kleber 75).

After this traumatic event, Mai became captive to her room for three days; she left only to relieve herself. She did not eat, did not cry and did not speak. Victims of such crimes suffer from a host of emotional reactions because they relive the fear, agony, anxiety and emotional numbness. Rumours began spreading around the village about how the family should have engaged in a *wata-sata* (exchange), where Shakur would have married Salma and Mai would have married a Mastoi. Mai was “blamed for her own gang rape” (Mai 12-13). “The social stigma associated with rape pressurises the victims to end up their lives. Rape victims are thus the most victimized victims in crime cases, as they are victimized first by their violator and then a second time once they report the crime to authorities” (Brody 13 December 2011). Madigan and Gamble refer to this as “second rape”(85). Magowan in her article “The Shame of Rape” argues:

The policy of hiding the rape survivor makes the media complicit in shaming and stigmatizing her. It reinforces the myth that women are too weak, traumatized and tainted to decide whether they want to tell their own stories of victory, not victimhood. And this assumption becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. (9 August 2002)

On the night of Mai's rape, her family returned to the police station for Shakur. The reality, however, was more complex. Human Rights Watch reported that “there are allegations that the police attempted to bribe the family in the amount of 11,000 rupees (US \$180) for the release of Shakoor”(12 July 2002). Furthermore, “investigations following Mai's accusations have found that Shakoor had been kidnapped and sexually assaulted by the same men who witnessed Mai's rape” (Masood 22 October 2005). As she sat at home, reliving in her mind what had happened to her and her brother, Mai grew numb and after some time she decided to kill herself by swallowing acid. Ashamed and guilt-ridden, Mai begged her mother to buy the acid so that her suffering could end because it was the only expected course of action for a woman so ashamed and thus the culturally accepted way to return the honour of

her family. Mai wrote that she wanted to die “so that my life may finally end, since I'm already dead in the eyes of others!” (19). Her mother begged her to stop and essentially “foiled her plan to commit suicide” (Mai 19). She continued to pray to God, asking him to help her choose between suicide and revenge. Mai wrote later that “she felt guilty for being raped, even though she knew it was not her fault” (25).

However Mai failed to carry out the expectations of the conventional community, namely to commit suicide: instead, she found enough strength to fight against the tribal conventions and decided to seek revenge by embarking on the mission to struggle but the laws in Pakistan are stacked high against women. It was difficult for her to prove in front of a legal commission that she was raped and her aggressors should be punished. According to Brownmiller “women like Mukhtar Mai eagerly struggle to make rape a speakable crime, not a matter of shame”(85). A woman who seeks the assistance of the state in convicting her rapist(s), or otherwise seeks to establish that her dignity has been offended, must be able to summon four male witnesses. Failure to do so can lead to her own conviction for fornication or adultery. But Mai's dogged determination ensured that her quest for justice would not go unnoticed, and in only a few days the news of the tribal ruling and of Mai's plight had travelled around the world.

According to Mai, on Friday, June 28, 2002, Maulvi Abdul Razzaq gave a sermon to his congregation about the gang rape. He condemned the rapists, and said what had happened to Mukhtar Mai was “a sin, a disgrace for the entire community”(24). He encouraged villagers to speak to the police. Mai's account of the events following her gang rape also pinpointed a local Pakistani freelance reporter who was in the congregation during Razzaq's sermon. “That reporter heard about what happened and wrote about it in his paper” (Mai 23). Thereafter, Mai, Shakur and their father and uncle were taken to the police station in Jatoi, the nearest city and for the first time in her life, she was approached by a number of reporters. Unsure of how to react to all of their questions about everything that had happened to her, Mai found herself revealing intimate details about the rape that had forever changed her. She said, “I sense instinctively that I must take advantage of the presence of these journalists” (26).

Mai's father supported her growing will to fight back for her rights, although she did not know much about her rights. There were enormous barriers in her way of seeking justice because women in rural areas of Pakistan are “isolated from the resources of information and therefore lack awareness of their legal and civil rights.” (Bari 183). All Mai knew was that women were objects of exchange from birth to marriage, objects who

had no rights. She recalled not even knowing that Pakistan had a constitution and laws written in books. She had never seen a lawyer or a judge until that point. She had no “concept of a legal system outside of the jirgas or panchayats that existed in the lawless regions of Pakistan” (Mai 28).

When it was time for Mai to be questioned by police, she felt suspicious. She stated that the officer writing her answers repeatedly left to consult a superior whom she never saw. Each time he returned, she watched him write a few lines although she spent a great deal of time in talking. Once he finished writing the statement, the officer had Mai dip her finger in ink and press it at the bottom of the page to serve as her signature, since Mai could not read or write. She writes that she later learned he had falsified information and included a false date in the report (30). As quoted by Bari “lack of formal education, especially in rural areas reinforces their lack of skills, limited access to economic resources and opportunities, rendering women economically and socially dependent on men”(133). Besides this, police officers also become perpetrators of harassment. As stated in *Double Jeopardy : Police Abuse of Women in Pakistan* “70% of women in Police custody are subjected to physical and sexual abusePolice in Pakistan frequently fail in their duties to provide contemporary justice”(130).

In her book and in interviews with journalists, Mai claimed that the verdict of raping her was made by a jirga in the presence of her community. She felt ashamed about what was done to her, and she felt even more shame having to discuss the details with male officers. Mai said there were almost no women in the police and judicial system near her. Not long after returning home around five that morning, the police arrived at her home again. This time, she was taken to the country police headquarters for formalities. Mai began to think that the “police were afraid of more journalists arriving”(Mai 32).

Nonetheless, she revealed information about the rape case. Journalists, in turn, told Mai about other rapes and acts of violence occurring around the country. She discovered that the media attention and human rights organizations gave her strength and protection from the Mastois, who lived just a few hundred yards away. She began to see herself as a symbol. Mukhtar Mai decided to fight for the women who “suffered in silence” (Mai 45). The press continued to cover Mai’s story because she was the first person in the country to put a tribunal system of justice on trial. At the same time, villagers began spreading rumours about Mai, saying she was an embarrassment and should have been ashamed to speak out. Parents stopped sending their children to Mai to learn the Quran (Mai 49). As stated in *“Honour” and Violence against Women in Pakistan*:

One of the major reasons that women victims are reluctant to take action against violence through courts is the fear of legal system and process about which they have no knowledge. Another major factor that intimidated the women in court environment was the number of men and their attitudes at seeing the women in the courts. (Ghai & Cottrell 175)

On July 4, 2002, human rights groups held a demonstration in Pakistan, demanding justice for Mukhtar Mai. The judiciary criticized police for taking too long to register her complaint and for forcing her to sign a blank document. A judge told the press there was no way for police to have not known about the gang rape before Mai pressed charges on June 30. He called the jirga’s decision a disgrace. Pakistani government officials also began making statements to the media about the case. The country’s Minister of Justice stated on British television that the verdict of the jirga should be considered an act of terrorism. The government of Pakistan treated Mai’s case as an affair of state. Two members of the Mastoi tribe had been arrested on July 2, and four others were on the run. Policemen surrounded Mai’s home for protection because she was afraid that the Mastois would retaliate. Police arrested 14 Mastoi men within days of international media breaking the story. The case was in court just weeks later.

On August 31, 2002, the court delivered its verdict. Six men were sentenced to death and fined 50,000 rupees for damages and costs. Four suspects were convicted of raping Mukhtar Mai and two men were convicted of instigating the rape as members of the jirga. Eight others were set free. Mai held a press conference outside courthouse, saying she was satisfied with the verdict, but she still wanted the eight freed Mastoi men behind bars. The six convicted men “vowed to appeal their death sentences” (Mai 73). Mai filled another appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the highest court of law but on April 21, 2011, the Court upheld the Lahore High Court decision. The court blamed Mai for triple presumption of innocence. The Supreme Court questioned Mai on numerous accounts of her ability to correctly identify her rapists since the rape occurred during the night, the weight of her testimony was also questioned and the eight-day delay in reporting the incident to the police were used as evidence against her. The court also refused to attach accomplice liability to the other council members of the crowd of 200 to 250 people that the court records acknowledged, were present at the time of the incident. The court used lack of evidence to uphold the decision.

Today, all but one rapist is free, while Mai has moved on with her life. She feels that had it not been for the hordes of human rights organizations, groups opposing violence against women and NGOs supporting her openly and forcefully, the media would not have given so much attention to her case. After all, "it was common to hear of men quarrelling, only to resolve their issues by cutting off a woman's nose, burning a sister, or raping a neighbour's wife" (Mai 67). She turned out to be a courageous woman who led a revolt against rape, illiteracy and the repression of women that has reverberated through all of Pakistan and to a limited extent in the entire world. The injustice done to her sowed the seeds of reforming her own society, "ultimately she believed that the only way to fight feudal attitudes was to educate people" (Kristoff viii). She was passionate about her mission; she sold her family jewellery to pay the teachers. She was not carried away by international limelight showered on her, rather chose her hometown as her work place: In US she appeared at banquets, hailed at the white house and was feted at luxury hotels and yet always counted the days to return to Pakistan" (80). She runs a girls' school and a non-governmental organization for abused women that she started with her compensation money and generous donations from aid agencies around the world. This uneducated woman was aware that education can bring a positive change in a society on both individual and collective levels. This can prove helpful for women who suffer more if they lack awareness and knowledge of their rights. Mai chose to speak rather than keep silent about her oppression and suffering and thus became symbol of iconic passion to fight against oppression.

This was a symbolic victory for Mai and her memoir tells not only of rape but subsequent strife she endured. Hence, she has become the global emblem of feminism by articulating her struggle for being heard. Mai yearned for self expression, individuality and self-identity. Her endeavours further depict how a marginalized tribal woman derives strength from her body and her inner feminine core to fight against her marginality. The dominant patriarchal structure usually restricts the discussions of rape laws. The story of Mukhtar Mai got international media attention forcing Pakistan to come to terms with reality of situation in terms of status of women. She has become known not only as a victim of gang rape but as an icon of strong women of Pakistan. After more than three years of social humiliation, courtroom battles and fearing for her life, she continued with her efforts to teach village girls. "While traditional tribal council made Mukhtar Mai a victim, Pakistan Judicial system continued to victimize her with unpredictable and unprecedented actions in her

case" (Karkera 14). Besides this, Mai's case has brought Pakistan's Judicial System and more specifically, many problems of the system into global spotlight. Language and literacy barriers, a lack of trust in the official system further complicated the relationship of Mai, as an average Pakistani Citizen with the nation's judicial System.

Her sense of shame and guilt did not undermine her life, rather she developed potential subjectivity by repositioning and defining her role as woman both inside and outside of social, cultural, and gender norms and thus became global face. Mai's literary discourse emerges out of her own experience; therefore, she suggests that she embodies the voice behind the lines of *In the Name of Honor* and is at the same time the female victim protagonist. "If so many people have come to find about me, it's because I stand for all the other women part of the country who have been violated. For the first time woman became a symbol" (Mai 45). She felt a sense of responsibility because she has become the spokeswoman for the oppressed women around the globe. Mai uses 'we' in her response to a question about her 'individual' vision, a 'we' that encompasses other women of Pakistan who feel emboldened to challenge injustice, to fight against violence enacted in the name of tradition or religion. She became sobriquet 'Mai' which in local dialect means respected elder woman.

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